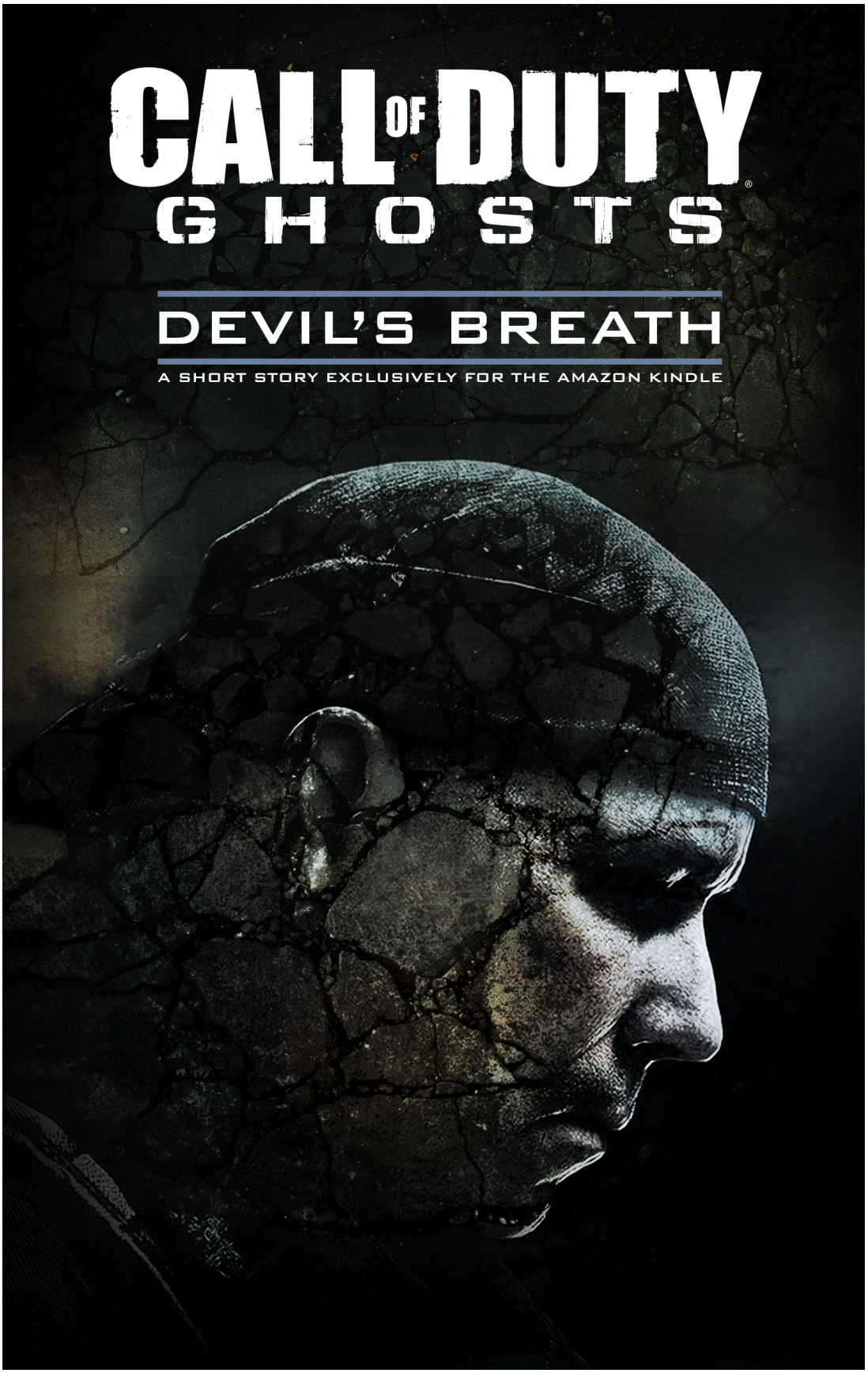
CALL OF DUTY
GHOSTS
DEVIL'S BREATH
A SHORT STORY EXCLUSIVELY FOR THE AMAZON KINDLE

Call of Duty: Ghosts
"Devil's Breath"

Before a devastating orbital strike crippled its government and set the stage for invasion, the United States military relied on a top-secret unit of special operatives known only by their codename:

The Ghosts.

But when their leader and commanding officer, Captain Gabriel Rorke, is captured deep in South America at the hands of the Federation, it's his place atop the highly-trained, off-books unit that makes him the highest-priority enemy combatant in American history.

Exclusively published on Kindle and Kindle devices, "Devil's Breath" buries readers underground with Rorke as he struggles to survive years of captivity, a victim of not only chemical, psychological, and physical torture methods perfected by the CIA but ancient Amazonian methods of coercion, fused by Federation forces with one goal in mind…

Reprogram America's greatest weapon into its greatest threat.

This book is associated with Call of Duty: Ghosts, which is an M-Rated video game. The contents of this book are intended for a mature audience. Content Descriptors: Blood and Gore, Intense Violence, Strong Language, Suggestive Themes, Use of Drugs.

Call of Duty: Ghosts
DEVIL'S BREATH

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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ONE

The last thing I remember is the first thing I remember.

Water…

Everywhere.

As in, Elias let me go and there I fell, swan-diving hundreds of feet into Caracas' man-made river rapids, its dam blown to shit just like the mangled mess of helicopter, fifteen thousand pounds of chopper that cannonballed on top of me. All I remember is water, then black, then waking up stripped of all my equipment and what looks like a third of my bodyweight.

My hosts appear intent on giving some back.

Fished me out and set the bones, healing me up for just this first lucid moment: the one where some merc slams a plastic piece of tubing into my mouth, past the entrance to my esophagus, then sends pints of parasite-infested water gushing into my gut.

Like I said.

Water…

Everywhere.

They funnel it in and they funnel it in and they funnel it in. I'm tied down, held down, so all I can do is chug, gulp the shit desperately until I'm captaining my own sea, capsizing in my own body.

They pull the tube.

They take turns punching me in the stomach.

I vomit everything up and we do it all again.

They funnel and I chug and they punch and I yak and they laugh and I yak some more. They stop laughing because I've landed some on their shoes. Then they're laughing again, pointing, because apparently I've pissed myself but hell if I can see anything, couldn't give a shit if I did, they're getting frisky with the tube again, back in there and not gentle about it. When it was a therapy, "water cure" called for about a liter and it cleansed the bowels. Then some soldiers got creative. The liter became gallons and water cure got outlawed quick for swelling the brain like a sponge, causing water intoxication, hyponatremia, death—things I hope to gift these Federation fucks. I file the technique away for a time I need something simpler than waterboarding, which is psychologically worse because your victim can't see, has no clue where it ends. This whole thing? It is strictly an exhibition. A power play. I must see they're in charge, *mira*? I must understand I'm nothing, *comprende*?

Them, this little jungle water gun: The Victors.

They pull the tube, land some body shots. I go yak. How they're not bored yet is beyond me. One lifts my chin. Points my eyes toward the patch on his shoulder. I don't catch the beginning but the end goes—*Our own stars and stripes, puta!*

—*Federación!*

He babbles on. I bubble over.

We repeat.

I can anticipate what's coming next. Even before Operation: Sand Viper all us Tier Ones enjoyed a proper SERE training. Sadly, so did they. Operation Condor kicked things off in the seventies, then came Operation Charly—by the end of it, little torture schools were taking roll in Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, pretty much all of South

America. In the name of anti-communism, we shared the playbook with all our allies and the 1983 *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual* has stayed a bestseller ever since. Safe to say, these needledicks know what I know, which means they might theoretically:

Shave my head.

Strip me down.

Sleep deprive me.

Lot of ways to do that last one. Knowing these Aquamen, it'll involve yet more water, the standard system being 740-mL bottles forced empty every hour so my bladder is the device keeping me awake. When it's your own body rejecting sleep, you hate yourself, you hate being the weakness, and that's way more effective than hating the private stuffing ammonia up your nose, the one asking to see your hands every thirty.

There's food deprivation and sensory deprivation.

Mock executions and denial of medicine.

For particularly frustrating enemy combatants, there's what's called "enhanced" techniques—that would be the waterboarding as opposed to this shit. Inverted on your back, one rag over mouth and nose, a steady stream. That vacuum effect, then utter panic. The writer from *Vanity Fair* lasted all of sixteen seconds and he *knew* it was coming.

They can use stress positions, or "submission positions" to use the ten-dollar. That'd involve the balls of my feet, a deep squat, my muscles failing agonizingly.

There's dogs. Not lap ones.

Flashlight into my corneas for half an hour, point-blank.

There's the bass at X-Ray Room in Club Gitmo, no earplugs allowed.

There are the pressure points on my temples, under my jawline, in the hollows beneath my ears. There's choking me just until I see God. There's bending my nose until it almost breaks or gouging those flashlit eyes. There's walling the back of my head in nice even sets of ten.

They might also hang me.

Not by the neck but by the arms, already tied behind my back, so my shoulders beg to come popping out of their sockets. Or the inverse, hanging me upside down for sixteen hours until my own piss runs down my chest and face and pools the floor. Or an old-school hanging by the wrists.

But I'm already hallucinating if I think we're doing any of that.

They won't do anything from the handbook because the handbook emphasizes tactics that don't leave permanent marks on the body. They're the shenanigans we pulled on our little Cuban slice of heaven because legal or not, those were the shenanigans that could never be *proven.* Water dries. Bruises heal. But while we toed the Geneva Conventions, these guys have no such intention. I'm no POW, not even a "missing person." I'm an enemy combatant without political asylum or proper paper trail. A Ghost. Right-hand to POTUS and they know it.

It'd be easy if I was just *compromised*, not shit out of luck. In that official reality I'm tagged HUMINT Priority I and filed Source Assessment 3A.

Cooperation Level: Three. *Does not respond to questioning.*

Knowledgeability level: A. *Very likely to possess PIR information.*

But this isn't Gitmo. There are no labels or codes. No EPW tags or psych evals. Nobody here will worry about bodily proof or getting transferred to some ROTC office in Boise for talking out of turn.

This is off-grid, thus I am off-books, therefore my body's open for business.

So I can't say I'm surprised when some jackhole extracts the tube, pulls out a blade, sticks it to my cheek, and starts to flay my face off.

He's careful. An Artisan. Carves a new canal from my left eye to my jawline in one smooth motion. I grin and bear it. Grit and grind my teeth until we both hear a molar pop.

These fucks.

They've gone medieval.

TWO

I speak some *español* but the word I hear upon waking up is a new one.

I assume it's some vernacular for my dick or a verb for how they plan to hack it off, char it like a brat.

Mozo.

Hear a lot of screaming that word and running around but then I remember my face and stop giving a shit. They've tied me in a classic prisoner position—on ass, ankles and wrists wedded—so I've gotta touch my toes if I'm gonna touch my face, which isn't easy thanks to my waterlogged insides. When I finally manage to bend over, I find they've kindly bandaged my non-elective plastic surgery in something damp and ragged.

I briefly assume they're concerned about infection but then I take inventory on where they've placed me—a hole in the ground, basically, just walls and floors of dirt—so no, I don't think they're *that* concerned. It's a deep one, sinkhole-like, almost twenty feet down and wide enough for me to lay flat, if they plan on allowing it.

The hole is covered by a crosshatch of inch-wide branches. Through the grid of green I see yet more of it: treetops, vines, white and yellow flowers blossoming between them. This humidity, summer or not, is distinctly South American. Must've taken me for a drive after Almagro's NH90. Based on tree cover, sounds, probably the Amazon, though who knows where precisely. Who knows *when*, either. The Op was on July 8th and it's hard to say how long I've been in and out. Weight loss and atrophy suggest months.

I'll wait until tonight, track Orion's belt, his sword.

Above, voices keep repeating that word *Mozo* but then I catch an *El*, and then an *hijo,* and then jeeps rumble in and it gets real quiet. Just monkeys, then, and insects, and birds, and then I realize it's not quiet at all. It's just the humans have shut up.

Then one speaks.

The voice is in its twenties. Bit older than Elias's boys.

The crosshatch of branches above me flips open and there's the Artisan who worked my face. He's leaning down, smiling a mouth of missing teeth.

—El Mozo is here.

—Who?

—Diego Almagro.

I know I killed Almagro and Artisan knows I killed him, so what-the-fuck is basically what I'm thinking.

Artisan looks over at someone next to him—above, where I can't see. Artisan nods down at me, says something. They're talking, then talking kind of louder, then kind of screaming. Artisan is grabbed from behind and pinned down against the edge of the hole. That mouth is done smiling. Vaguely see two shapes on either side of him. Fresher Federation uniforms. Fancy red berets.

I'm pleased Artisan is learning what submission positions feel like.

Then, on the other side of the hole, Almagro.

It's another Diego Almagro, not the one I helped execute. A younger model, Diego's twenty-something son, Diego Almagro II. He is *El Mozo*, The Lad. In broken English he tells me that's what they've all begun to call him and I'm free to as well. Then El Mozo says he knows what they call me, too, which is Captain Gabriel Rorke,

commander of the Ghosts. He apologizes for the actions of his man. No one will take such liberties again. Another man walks up behind El Mozo. This is your caretaker, El Mozo says, patting an elder on the back. He looks older than the jungle behind him—two empty pits for eyes, leather skin that leads up to silver hair. His ponytail hangs across his chest like a dead vine. Caretaker and El Mozo have a word, then Caretaker walks away. The berets are still holding Artisan down when El Mozo stands back a step, aims, shoots him through the top of the head.

Seems The Lad takes after his father.

The bullet pops through Artisan's jaw about where he cut into mine, dirt trickling down from where it lodges into the wall of my hole. El Mozo mumbles something in Portuguese and walks away. The two berets work together to cut Artisan's head off and let it fall into the hole, where it stays for two days and two nights.

THREE

I don't sleep.

The berets pouring buckets of water on my head every half hour contributes.

The smell, too.

And my jaw.

Mostly, though, it's the fact Almagro's son can barely grow a beard but is already ordering beheadings. And the fact he knows who I am.

Specifically: How these two things intersect.

Forty-eight hours of uninterrupted wakefulness gives me plenty of time to audit what they think I know, what they'll have fun extracting. Eleven years' worth of mission intel includes safehouses, unit organization, assigned personnel before and after Snake Bite. It includes artillery, armor, engineers—any and all of Ghosts' supporting units, an extensive list thanks to a very gracious POTUS. It includes offensive and defensive tactics, communication protocols, our night maneuvers, rehearsals, and equipment.

But most importantly—Merrick, Ajax, Elias.

They'll want the names and locations of every single Ghost.

For now, all they know is they have the commander of the unit that killed *their* commander, Diego Almagro, as insane a dictator as insane dictators go. Like Germany marching across Europe pre-WWII, the General began acquiring South American countries like they were credit cards, cutting them up afterwards, carrying the balance onward to the next one. Thanks to the Drake Passage, shiny new oil reserves greased the path. Nations bought in, got bought out. *El sueño de Bolívar, la segunda parte:* The

twenty-first century dream of a united South America, with a fresh dictator doing the dreaming. By the time Almagro and his Federation annexed Venezuela, Colombia and Bolivia, UN Peacekeeper body parts began washing up on shore, and that dream down south became a nightmare up north. Proper reciprocation required a proper regime change, so the President called upon the Ghosts, his private instruments of fear. It was my call to orphan young El Mozo.

Snake Bite was fairly simple: Infil Caracas and execute Diego Almagro. While we did that, another invasion force was to neuter the budding Federation capital's infrastructure. But the moment Almagro realized the Ghosts were in town, he blew the dam outside of Caracas himself. Flooding the city accomplished two things.

The short-term benefit: It killed half of our troops.

The long-term one: It'll galvanize the Federation's hatred toward America, as we were the ones who invaded, supposedly blew the dam.

Still can't believe the *cojones*, the utter refusal to surrender. The move with the dam would be almost inspirational if not for my own circumstances. I suppose it was then, too, water rushing down the streets of Caracas like fifty Katrinas. There's the fork in the road with Merrick on one side, recommending retreat, and me and my veto on the other, pushing us onward, no other option on the table. Pushing and pushing all the way up until the ramp on that shit helo bent and buckled, but know this: there is zero regret. I'd fish Elias out of the water and take that fork until Almagro was dead every single time. I'm the reason I ended up on the edge of that helo, and if there's a regret, something I think about down here, it's that I hung on for my life instead of doing the honorable thing, which would've been to let go, eat a grenade on the way down.

Elias held on long as he could. Any longer and the bird would have sent the whole unit down.

Those are my thoughts for two days straight.

Every cold bucketful is a reminder that I should've stayed under the water in Caracas. Should've let the tube top me off here in the Amazon.

I suppose I think about other things. The speed of Caracas' currents. The drones that were in the area. How wide Elias's search grid might be. I wonder whether he'll get the boys a dog once he quits, heads home; if he'll go with a German Shepherd like I told him to.

The water I drink when they pour their buckets isn't enough. My training hiccups and I begin to hallucinate from the heat, the lack of food. I see my men in the shadows and in the dirt. I start tripping, end up back a decade, Sand Viper playing out on the hole's walls like hieroglyphs. I see their five hundred charging our sixty. I see who was left on that last day in the roots and clay; I see who died decomposing in the sediment between them. I see fifteen soldiers out of ammo, out of options, hiding beneath their dead brothers for one last chance at surprising the enemy. I see sand sticking to their brothers' blood, bonding with their own, camouflaging every face in death and desert. I see sixty men rise in fifteen, and those fifteen rise for the millions back home. I see eleven years in two sunsets. I see my long vertical sinkhole become a coffin, and then a rifle's chamber, and then a bullet shooting through time.

All the while, Artisan's head is just sitting there, rotting.

After two days' worth of buckets, there's sludge up to my ankles, up above his ears. I pick up the head by its hair and shake it out. Half of Artisan's face is stiff from

rigor mortis, the other bloated, beginning to decompose. Those toothless gums have paled and hardened, white enough to be teeth again. Maggots whiten like crowns.

Holding it as I would a football, I face the whole head downward, seams out and forehead furthest, then lean back against the wall. I wedge my right foot into that toothless mouth and readjust my grip, so it's underhand in the jaw and on the chin. Then it's a pull-up with a leg-press—using all my chains' slack, I extend my legs and pull in with my arms until I feel the jaw give, hear it crack, and then I pull even harder, not stopping until the tendons finally let and there's soil sticking to blood and bone piercing air, not stopping until Artisan's jaw is as open as a snake's.

I twist, giving it everything I have left.

Loosened by that bullet, the lower jawline finally snaps clean off.

I'm in business.

Palming what's left of Artisan by the back of the head, I slam the cranium down into my wrist, let it feed like a zombie. I'm still sawing the splintered bone along my radial when the berets pull the hatch, rappel down. I notice they seem eager to not let me die, then black out from the blood loss.

FOUR

They're smart. Know they can't throw me back in the hole because I'll just shove dirt into the wound or mud down my throat, eat sludge until my immune system cries mercy and I die in happy agony.

Instead, they give me my own bed, a metal twin, real sturdy and with a bonus feature: two exposed electrodes connected to an old field telephone. In Spanish they call this a *parilla*, which translates roughly to cooking grill or barbecue. This will make sense once I smell my flesh and based on the bed's shades of crimson, this particular model has plenty of baked-in flavor, probably broken in by Pinochet's regime in Chile or Operation Charly.

Of course, the latter liked to hammer six-inch dowels through the temple, so as always, there's a bright side.

Another bright side: recognition. I actually remember this place with the *parilla*. Know it, just don't know how. Memory's cloudy, likely drugged, but I remember this bed and telephone, the carpet of twigs and fronds, the station in the corner with the bins of ethanol and those white and yellow blossoms from above my sinkhole. A lack of roof and four rusted sheets of aluminum for walls bounce heat as if we're in a microwave. The only item safe from sun is the crank phone, pedestaled on a milk crate and covered by another slab of aluminum, angled in case it rains.

But then they blindfold me and all that's left is the metal on my back, the wire they wrap around the tip of my pecker, the other one they lasso around my big toe.

They're all talking and laughing and then none of them are, and I have the feeling that El Mozo is in here again.

—*Someone there?* I ask.

—*Sí*.

I'm not sure if it's an answer or an authorization.

The little jack-in-the-box gets cranking and I realize it was both. The first wave of juice catches me by surprise and I bite clean through the edge of my tongue, spit blood into the air like a fountain. My punishment is controlled through the speed of the field telephone's crank, so even though I can't see, I can hear the voltage coming. A crank-beat-crank and they're warming me up, then hyperdrive, a *crank-crank-cran-cra-cr*— faster and faster up-shifts until I only have enough time to catch my breath before they go back to stealing it.

All this we're trained for. I compartmentalize everything, dump it back in the sinkhole in my head. Then it's just physical, which is just physical. Blood from my nose joins the pool from my tongue. Boiling from the inside out, I go involuntary. My fingers curl into fists, lock; my arms curl from the bed, lock; my legs, kicking and bucking like a horse, stretch the leather restraints saddled around each ankle. The cranking stops and one of the Fed mercs tells another to hold my legs down harder. The grip must be new. Burns himself on the restraints' buckles, sending everyone into laughter. They call him some names, call some of the guys over to look at his burns. I smell flesh and consider my first definition for *Mozo,* charred brat, and visualize the wasteland below my waistline.

I'm not sure when I black out or for how long but I wake up to an old, leathery voice. I'm still blindfolded but it feels like we're alone. Caretaker addresses me in English.

—We did not save your life so you could throw it away.

He's referring to my self-inflicted zombie suicide attempt—Artisan's makeshift shiv. I try to say fuck off, then something about my not saying anything, but mostly I just taste blood.

—Who asked for intelligence? Caretaker says, laughing. He drops a hand on my shoulder.

—Captain, understand one thing: You are here because you chose to be here, and you are still here because you chose again. You wanted a regime change and you got it. Now you have El Mozo, not his father. Now you have his cleverness, his commitment. You created him, Captain, introduced hate to his ambition, brought blood to his palate. And because nobody is looking for you, fighting for you, negotiating for you, we will never ask for your radio frequencies, your alternate freqs, your unit's call-signs. You changed history, history moved on without you, and now can remain here to observe history first-hand.

Caretaker removes that hand.

—Try and get comfortable.

I don't expect this.

Torture and interrogation go together like *parillas* and field-telephones. You don't have one without the other. This little one-bedroom is an intelligence battlefield, and like all battlefields, there is an operating system. Informational superiority requires tactical

questioning. Caretaker here is the agent, I am the target, and what the agent must do is break down his target's identity, assault it into disassociated mush. Bonus points for doing the same to his genitals, I suppose, but the key here is deconstruct that I am an American soldier, Captain of the Ghosts, a calloused right-hand to the President.

But what's bothering me as I check to see if those leg restraints are still tight is that we're not going down that road yet. Caretaker claims he doesn't care about our unit or protocols. All he's asking is that I stop smashing skulls and cutting myself.

—So then what the fuck am I doing here?

—Your men never came looking for you and we can't well let you out, either, so here you are. Nothing to do about it.

—So what do you want?

—I'd be more concerned about why your men allowed you to be captured. Why did they let you die?

I know what he's doing. Then I don't.

Because how would he know about Elias and the helo? Unless he saw?

—What do you mean let me go?

Caretaker leans in. I smell barbecue on his breath but can't say for sure it isn't me.

—End the theater. We know you're angry. You said plenty when we found you. You asked us to help you. That's all we're doing.

Still blindfolded, I spit red in Caretaker's general direction and learn quickly that we're not alone. A rifle butt lands in my stomach and the room comes to life with a dozen voices, chairs falling back behind charging boots. Caretaker silences them.

—Basta! Que se quede hasta que se acuerde, luego que se vaya.

I'm pretty sure my brain is hemorrhaging. I think he just said that I'm to stay until I remember, and then I'm free to go. Which can't be.

—*Remember what? If I'm free to go, then why the fuck the shocks?*

The room does its jungle thing again. Gets real quiet, real fast.

—*Because you killed Almagro,* pedaza. Gringo *piece of shit.*

The first of many needles hit my shoulder.

FIVE

Six weeks become six months. There's talk of Panama, the Canal, ODIN, but if I look too lucid, they hit me with more needles. Murky shit goes in, I go out.

Between blackouts and blindfolds, I try and scan the Feds' uniforms for discerning emblems. Listen for rifle practice. Count the jeeps that come in and out of camp. I track how long they serve chow, whether a field mess prepares it hot or they spoon it out of pouches; I scan their primary and secondary weapons, noticing who keeps theirs meticulously clean; I spot fancy red berets on every Fed head, meaning they're disciplined, staying that way. Most of the mercs are more fair-skinned than my Caretaker, likely flown in from the north, maybe Almagro's native Venezuela.

Conclusion: this is no rag-tag jungle nonsense. The Feds are fairly elite.

But the Ghosts *define* elite.

It made sense for a while: Caracas was hot, they had to regroup, POTUS might've needed support in Panama. But now? It makes no sense. Elias should be here. I'd have been here. I'd have torn down the whole fucking forest to be here.

They do a little rearranging of my *parilla* pad. That station in the corner with the blossoms goes away. A little station with hanging iron wrist restraints goes up. They drug me for sport, beat me for exercise, but never really bother hunting for HUMINT. Just leave me to grow beards until they shear them off, grow thin only to beat me thinner. Some of the sadistic ones sneak in to show me relics. They call it show and tell, then spit their chew, chuckling. All sorts of rusted tools of the trade. Things that make warriors squeal, things that'll mute that squealing.

I realize then why I might want to be muted.

I've been mumbling.

Can't remember what, don't let myself care.

I snap back in. Meditate and center. They have a job to do; I have a job to do. Mine is to maintain my physical reserves. Stay lucid. They know that and toe the line, professional enough to not to let me go over.

I try and keep my mind sharp. Game plan and prepare for what's coming by thinking through everything. Realize for all the talk of choke pears, they're serving up some advanced chem, injectable cocktail medleys that prove they're connected, even out here. I try and anticipate the different neurolinguistics, all the types of tactical questioning and approach techniques. That patented process by which I become the bad-man, self-betray, ask to be reborn with a red beret.

Easy to see the exploits. Every drowned civilian in Caracas; every civilian we couldn't evac during Sand Viper. I add them to the file folder in my head, along with redacted passages on extreme rendition, political assassination, all the other greatest hits. If these guys knew what they were doing, they'd be labeling and recording everything: paper, audio, video—at least *something,* and likely that something redundant with *something else.* Just as many of our units deploy with some sad fucking boot humping paperwork along with frags, and in situations like these, where HUMINT is so critical, we'd have labeled me with an ISN instantly.

Fed doesn't, so I do, if for no other reason than to keep me busy and stay sane. I build out my file in my head. The ISN goes something like:

US – SF – X – 0007 – 1807 – FESF – 0098

I repeat the number like a mantra. It reminds me of who I am, who they are, when they got me, what we're doing here in this room with the permanent skylight. The interrogation serial number breaks my broken body into seven parts: **US** for United States origin, **SF** for Special Purpose Forces (code for: Ghosts), **X** for Officer in Command of an Irregular Force (code for: doesn't exist), **7** for the 7th man captured by this unit (I've learned the six prior were unsuccessfully "coerced"), **0807** for July 8th (my capture date), **FESF** for Federation (FE) and **SF** (Special Forces), and **98** for this ragtag unit's official number (I hear it on team-to-all comms). We'd link everything to such an ISN—objectives, initial approach techniques, any noteworthy direct questions or elicitation techniques or deceit markers. OIC sign-off would tie to it, which is important if you're going to throw a Gitmo guest into a hypothermic chamber to chatter for an afternoon. Particularly because you want your ass covered if he dies.

But I have no label, besides maybe the word *puta*, which the Feds don't seem to tire of using. All I can do is take my needles, take their punishment—log what they do when I don't lose time.

Our two playbooks exhibit marked differences:

My playbook:	**Their playbook:**
The Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 1949.	*Loose guidelines carved into dead logs with rusted machetes.*
My playbook:	**Their playbook:**
Prisoners of war are entitled in all circumstances to respect for their persons and their honor. –Article 14	*Our jungle is a delicate ecosystem and prone to fires even in monsoon season. If smoking a cigarette, securely put it out on the prisoner's back, then deposit into his water cup.*
My playbook:	**Their playbook:**
Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to	*Lay prisoner on stomach and tie legs and arms to posts. Leave fruit pulp or peel by*

any unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind. –Article 17	*face. Let mosquitos swarm until prisoner's face has grown 2x and he cannot see out his eyes or breathe through his nose.*

None of this is fun, so I make some. I spit in into faces. Dare them to break something new. Suggest arthritis when they choose the bamboo with the razor wire knotted around it. Remind them Caretaker's the only one with authority. All the while, I mentally log which arms they favor, what wounds they might be concealing, what kind of endurance they've got. I memorize what pockets carry what, who carries the jeeps' keys. I follow the sun, track its shadows with sticks; follow the moon, wait for it to wax; follow the Southern Cross, track down from the South Celestial Pole—anything to ascertain azimuth and direction. Then I tell them precisely what I have ascertained to observe their reactions. I heal from these reactions' bruises. I test my restraints constantly. I flex my muscles, one at a time, to keep them as strong as can be expected without PT. I stare skyward for the faint flicker of sunlight-on-drone. For helos. For Elias.

My playbook: *Prisoners of war interned in unhealthy areas, or where the climate is injurious for them, shall be removed as soon as possible to a more favorable climate. –Article 22*	**Their playbook:** *Prisoners may begin to suffer from a common American defect called Seasonal Affective Disorder. This arises when prisoners do not experience the joy of all four seasons and grow despondent and sad. Since our climate provides plenty of Vitamin D, submit prisoner to biweekly cycles of hypothermia in 40-degree transport pod by dousing with cold water every fifteen minutes. Convulsions and bare skin sticking to the ground are signs of effective treatment.*
My playbook: *The basic daily food rations shall be sufficient in quantity, quality and variety to keep prisoners of war in good health and to*	**Their playbook:** *Feed prisoner steady diet of low-protein gruel. Should something crawl, fall, tunnel, fly, or be born in his quarters, confiscate*

prevent loss of weight or the development of nutritional deficiencies. –Article 26	*immediately. Prisoner will attempt to weaponize on you or self.*

I wonder who Elias has and where he has him. Maybe Caretaker's son. An El Mozo cousin. I wonder how far Elias is taking his own interrogation to find me. What kind of leader he has become. I conjure up this man, this invisible informant, and beat him senseless with Elias's arms. I stick tubes down his throat with Elias's fingers. I hear the screams of this man whose teeth Elias yanks out, who gives up molars for safehouses emptier than his mouth. I urge Elias: push on, pull the nails from this man's fingers, trace the man's smeared blood across the map. I tell Elias not to punish shit leads by breaking more broken bones but by setting the broken bones wrong so the informant lives out the rest of his life in agony.

The sign of a pro: When you can hurt someone simply by letting them heal.

My playbook: *The Detaining Power shall be bound to take all sanitary measures necessary to ensure the cleanliness and healthfulness of camps and to prevent epidemics. –Article 29*	**Their playbook:** *The shit bucket should be emptied by prisoner every few days. Fresh leaves can be provided at squad's discretion.*
My playbook: *The duration of any single punishment shall in no case exceed thirty days. –Article 90*	**Their playbook:** *Do whatever the fuck you want, whenever the fuck you want.** **Prisoner US – SF – X – 0007 – 0807 – FESF – 0098: All actions must be pre-approved by Caretaker or management.*

I snap back to reality less, lose my day count, my momentum, begin calendarizing existence by shifts in technique and tenor. Which doesn't mean I lose. I simply come back lucid less, and at odd times. In the eyes of animals in the treetops high above me. In

the stars winking ever higher. There's no rush. No Rorke. No mantras of name-rank-social. I can only let them do what they want and ask what they want, then do what I want and ask what I want.

One afternoon, what I want: to stretch my hamstring by extending my foot directly into one of the merc's faces.

What they want: a teachable moment, in the form of bullet ants.

But I'll explain those later.

First, they lay me on my back with my ankles in the air so they can sash them to bamboo branches, tenderize their bottoms with sticks until the soles are raw as uncooked steaks. Then they make me run in place until I collapse. With flight-and-kick risk properly reduced, I'm tied up by my wrists opposite of the *parilla*, where they used to stow those bins of ethanol. I lose feeling in my arms, then everywhere else. Blood pools down into my heels, leaks through ripped toes onto the floor.

After sixteen hours of sun, the blood at my feet simmers, reduces, dries as dark and black as dirt. Without any shade, my skin crisps worse than on the *parilla.* I see the crank phone's roof heat like a griddle and then I'm cooking, too, a slow roast in which I peel and my peel burns. Something hangs in the air, here, and I succumb to it. I detach.

That's when I discover Elias.

Up in the tree tops, holding onto my swollen wrists, not letting go.

I see him clear as day, feel the strength in his grip. I'm about to yell out to him when one of the Feds untie my raw, roasted right arm, separating us. I swing the swollen blob into the beret's nose, shattering it like the twigs he lands in. After that, still hanging by my left arm, I learn those boots they wear are steel-toed.

And after that, I finally learn about the bullet ants.

They earn their name: The giant ants stab you with about thirty-times the strength of a bee thanks to a neurotoxin that paralyzes you, sends your body into overdrive for twenty-four hours until the toxins dissipate.

And that's *one* bite.

What I do is trigger my training, but the ants. They're giant. Relentless. Caretaker gets the little bastards punch-drunk by swirling them in an herb bath until pliable, then positions them stinger-out into gloves of woven leaves he doses with smoke to get the bullet ants good and irritated. That way when they meet my skin, they're hungry for my buffet of palm and pad and knuckle.

Dozens of bites, then hundreds.

Caretaker kindly explains that the bullet ants have evolved so that their neurotoxin prevents the body from curbing pain. The effect is escalating agony so that any animal thinks it's suffered much more damage than it actually has. Then it runs and doesn't come back.

He leaves the gloves on for an hour, twice as long as the Amazonian warriors who use this as an initiation ceremony.

Then we go for fifty reps, twice the tribes' treatment *again*.

As if the ants' stinging—the worst in the world—wasn't painful enough, the venom paralyzes my hands, swells them like stumps. At first, it feels like nails ripping through my nails but then it's gasoline in those holes, fire searing through my flesh. Even expecting this, all I can manage to do is wail, sob uncontrollably, convulse and go numb. If I was lying down, I'd die, but the fact I'm strung up keeps me alive. I look up, thankful

for my chains, and rediscover Elias, this time listening to Merrick, who is screaming to let me go, to save the group. My hands and wrists pulse. I claw inside my gloves, past the ants, up toward Elias. It takes him a second to decide. I fall, then fall unconscious.

We switch off every damn day. Bamboo, bullet ants, repeat.

Feet, hands, feet, hands, until they know I'm too exhausted to fight or escape. Until my limbs are my anchors and the only thing holding me up or letting me go is made of iron.

SIX

Water's that thing we train in, hump through, seek out for survival. Funny how something so essential to life can become the enemy, and funny how it's still something I can count on now. Though I fell in it, woke up in it, have nearly drowned in and out of it, water seems to be the one thing they'll bring me when I need it.

Hydration: My lifeblood, my curse.

I call for some and one of the low-level errand types brings it over. The guy's been by before to dab at burns, stick food in my mouth, touch up the restraints. He's skinnier than me which is saying something. Water-wise, he usually brings a bucket to dump on my face but this time it's a cup. Dirty nails tip it into my lips carefully and I take in every drop, ask for more. I know I'm fucked when he says that he can't and laughs. He's never laughed.

Need to vomit, get it out, but every limb is locked in place.

—*What'd you do? What'd you give me?*

Caretaker walks in.

—*Above his pay grade.*

He asks the bony one to get out.

—*Captain Rorke, has your unit employed scopolamine?*

It sounds like a chemical weapon. Something that chokes babies with their own snot.

—*No.*

In his hand, he's got one of the blossoms I saw through the bottom of my hole. The big and yellow and white ones that were next to the bins of ethanol on that first day in the *parilla* room.. Brings the petals to his face but only fakes an inhalation.

—*The pollen alone,* amigo.

He brings it to my nose. Flower looks civilian enough but I turn my head, hold my breath.

—*When I was five or six, my mother found me sleeping under a borrachero tree at my uncle Rodrigo's villa in Ecuador. These,* and he waves the flower at me, *were in full blossom. Mama said I screamed and laughed in my dreams all night from the pollen. She said I was lucky the saints kept a seed from falling in my mouth. Otherwise…*

Puts two fingers to his temple, pops the hammer.

—*We make scopolamine from this flower. It grows in the streets of Bogotá like anything else. Takes a little processing but eventually you get a powder that looks just like Columbia's other big export.*

Caretaker looks me up and down with a squint and lean of his head.

I don't look away.

—*I recognize this Gabriel. I think you'll listen now.*

He drags a chair across the room from the *parilla* station and takes a seat.

I want to know where he's going with all this.

—*One gram costs about forty pesos. Good budget for street cons. Quite a few of the men here were runners for local gangs. Only ten or eleven and stationed at some corner waiting for* gringos *to come around. What they did, Captain, was unfold the map and ask in perfect American: "I can't find my parents. Do you know where the Hilton*

is?" Then they'd point at some intersection on the map. Gringos would lean into it, so helpful, and the boy blew scopolamine into their face, right off the map.

Caretaker throws his braid back behind him. Lowers his voice.

—Captain, keep listening please.

He scoots up. Swings a satchel around his hip into his lap.

—Like any substance, the tricky part is not overdoing it. It's easy to overdose and kill a customer. You have to test and wait, then adjust. An American with drug habits can be intolerant. An American in peak condition, too. Give him too much and his heart can simply stop.

Caretaker stands up from his chair.

—Lucky for you, we have had some practice.

He puts his arms on my shoulders and rests them there.

—Captain, do me a favor please. What are the primary and alternate frequencies for your unit's radios?

—SATCOMS rotate. Used SHF last. Always encrypted, sometimes via civilian relays. Short answer: no answer.

—Bien. *I'm going to let you of your shackles now. Please take a seat in my chair when I do.*

I'm unshackled. The chair looks comfortable and I sit in it. Caretaker walks to the other side of the room and unloads the satchel's contents onto a work bench.

—The streets call scopolamine "devil's breath" because it evaporates free will with no recall of the event. Medically, this has to do with postsynaptic receptors. Visually, you look stone sober and act normal, but you will do anything anyone asks just

to please them, and you won't remember any of it afterwards. Imagine: a sí *to* everything. *Like how you serve your precious POTUS. Blindly.*

He's back. Pulls a second chair over.

—Of course, we've done all this before, in this very room. That first day.

Caretaker hands me a lighter and a long wooden needle.

—Captain, would you mind heating the other end of this kambo stick up until it is hot, then placing it on the back of your thigh?

I hurry through the errand, heating up the fat end of the kambo and pressing it against my thigh. My calf twitches once and we are done. I hand back both items.

—Very good. Now sit still please.

Caretaker pulls a bright green frog out of the leather satchel. He holds it down on the ground with his foot while pushing four sticks into the ground. The frog has strings tied to its arms and legs, dangling out like extensions. Caretaker uses them to tie each limb tightly to a stick, then pulls the little animal taut and parallel with the ground. The frog has a cream-colored belly. It's pliant. Seems used to this.

—Say buenos días *to the Giant Leaf Frog. He's nocturnal—we've woken him up.*

—Hi, I whisper. *Sorry we woke you.*

The frog looks like a recent version of me, stretched out by every limb, waiting for what's next. Caretaker runs the unburned end of the kambo down its stomach a few times until it's damp. Leaves the frog strung up and turns to me.

—These sapos *have a cleansing effect. In two stages, their toxin purges you, then heightens your senses. I use it as a cure for your scopolamine but the local tribes use it before they go on hunts.*

Caretaker pricks open the burn blister forming on my thigh and deposits the extract.

—*There.*

He places the used kambo back in the satchel. Snips the frog off its suspended crucifix and drops it in too.

—*This scopolamine is no long-term solution for your type of reluctance. It would eventually kill you, rot your short-term memory. But interrogation, disinhibition—those wouldn't work, either. We've had to get creative with you. Enhance the Federation's resources with centuries-old techniques. Hence, here*—Caretaker waves around the room—*versus any of the urban safehouses.*

Without warning, his braid flips toward the room's opening.

—*Entrado!*

I redirect my attention to the entrance. In walks a Ghost. He's in full cammies—cargos and Kevlar, holstered sidearm, bandana atop a black ski mask. I notice my insignia emblazoned front and center. The American flag on CAPT RORKE's shoulder rises up, then toward, in salute. Instinctively I stand at attention, salute back.

—*Captain Rorke,* Caretaker says to the man in fatigues. *Please hand me your weapon.*

The gun is deholstered and tossed into Caretaker's hand, who places it in mine.

—*Gabriel, shoot him, please.*

The gun feels heavier in my hand than I remember. I hold it with both, raising the sight as I close one eye. Give the Ghost two pops, center mass. Lower the sidearm and safety it.

—*The weapon,* por favor*?*

I hand it over handle first.

—*What's next won't be pleasant. You'll begin to vomit from the kambo's application. It will get this all out of your system, and then you'll feel better.*

I walk back to my chains and raise my arms up for him to secure them.

I look forward to Caretaker's promise that soon I'll feel better, and then I do.

SEVEN

Water's that thing we train in, hump through, seek out for survival. Funny how something so essential to life can become the enemy, and funny how it's still something I can count on now. Though I fell in it, woke up in it, have nearly drowned in and out of it, water seems to be the one thing they'll bring me when I need it.

Hydration: My lifeblood, my curse.

I call for some and one of the low-level errand types brings it over. It's not the usual kid—the skinny one. This one's cleaner cut, newer to the jungle. Has some padding on him.

I'll need his help to drink it because I wake up lying down, not hanging. Tied up again into the *parilla,* but at least this time we're using a mattress.

—*Water?* I ask.

—*You filled your bucket already.*

I look down and he's right—there's my old water bucket full of what this guy is suggesting is *my* vomit.

—*What happened?*

—*A bite. Your thigh.*

His mention of it makes me acutely aware—the back of my left thigh is at DEFCON 1. I turn my body into a figure-S, neck craned against the restraints for a look. It's gruesome. A massive blister with a sprouted top. Volcano Gabriel, lava hot, oozing.

—*The fuck bit me?*

From the doorway, a voice I know.

—Surucucu*, a bushmaster snake. We administered anti-venom. Not before some sickness, though.*

—Suppose you want a thank you. For all this generosity.

—No, not at all. Only curious how you're feeling? Better?

Outside of the bite, I actually feel…rather good. Don't remember yakking and it actually seems like I'm more present. Vision's crisp. Feel stronger than I have in weeks. I dare say bring on the bushmaster snakes, assuming we've got the anti-venom to handle it.

Don't give Caretaker any credit though.

—I'm not dead of a bite, if that's what you're asking.

—I'll take that as a thank you.

—It's not. If you'd let me thank you, I'd thank you. But you haven't let me out yet.

—You're still upset. About the man who cut your face? Your treatment here?

—Nope. He got his. Just don't get why you killed him. Why you're nice and all the other red caps play bad cop.

—I'm nice because you asked me to be nice.

I close my eyes. This fucking shit again.

—You don't remember, do you? he says, and it's crazy, but I get a flash right then. Of me shooting a Ghost. Right here in this room, execution style. Seems my time away from hallucinations was short lived.

Caretaker takes a seat in front of me.

—When we first found you, you asked for our help. You told us you'd been abandoned by your men.

I recall all those bullet ants, biting and never letting go. Visions of Elias doing the opposite.

—You told us they dropped you to your death. You said your men surrendered their commander. You told us you admired Almagro for blowing the dam, for never quitting—that it was this side, rising and relentless, that fit your mold.

It's no use doing something theatrical like pulling on my restraints. I stay quiet.

—But afterwards, when you woke up, you didn't remember any of it. We've been patient. We've waited for it to come to you. We can't just let you go or let you out. You're in your old mindframe. You'd kill us. But who found you? Who helped you? Who has nursed you back to health?

—You sliced my face. Neutered my hands and feet. Left me in that hole only to shock me, starve me. Fuck off with your gracious host bullshit.

—The man who sliced your face was executed on the spot. We do not condone doing this to our own. He acted out because of the General's murder, not knowing what you'd said when we found you.

—Sure. I forgive him then.

Caretaker's up, walking across to the milk crate with the crank phone.

—We have been patient. Maybe now it's time.

Seems that little aluminum roof covered more than my little torture tool. He leans the panel backward and reaches behind the phone, pulling out a camera.

Leans the glare-free LCD toward my face.

The camera clicks on and suddenly I'm staring at myself a hundred pounds heavier. A fucking monster in body armor. I'm laying in a bed without restraints on it. I'm soaking wet. I still have my bandana, my cammies, my equipment.

I still have my freedom.

There I am, looking into the camera.

Telling myself that the only reason I'm alive is because of the Federation.

Telling myself to remember this moment, to never forget because of the head trauma.

Telling myself that Elias let me go and didn't think twice about it. That Ajax fired his sidearm at me as I fell. To wait and see if anyone comes looking for me like I'd go looking for them. To not be stupid. They executed me, then executed me.

Passive, pensive Elias.

More ruthless than I gave him credit for.

Caretaker turns the camera off, pulls something else from inside the milk crate. He brings over my old cammies, folded tight and trim like they have a dry-cleaners here on site.

—*We did our best to clean them for you.*

Caretaker places them in my hands. The fabric feels frayed, stiff.

—*Look there,* he says, *at the heart.*

I recognize the entry holes right away. Two .45s to the chest, millimeters apart. A pro's shot. A Ghost's shot. The marksmanship of highly trained operatives who let me go, then never came looking. Who left me to rot in a hole, to fry on the *parilla,* to get intimate with sinkholes and shit buckets and this whole goddamn jungle. Who proved I

was as expendable as our mark, as any boot humping file folders. That old Rorke realized the truth, looked it in the eyes when it let him go. Put it on the record for this Rorke, who has simply survived breath to breath, too dumb and detached and distracted to do anything but be a good little Ghost, waiting for his President to claim him from the pound.

The truth is I'd be dead if it weren't for these Federation fucks. I'd be under water. That hazy image, the one of me shooting a Ghost—it makes sense now.

The thought hits me lucid and clear.

Ajax is first.

Elias is second.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Rudin is the best-selling author of RIGHTFUL KING, a Kindle Exclusive that reached #15 worldwide and earned "Best Original Content" recognition at the 2013 Game Developers Conference. Rudin is also the recipient of a Hopwood Award for the Novel from the University of Michigan.

His work has been published in five languages, appearing in *The Huffington Post*, the textbook *Creative Composition*, *The Journal of Electronic Publishing*, *The Collagist*, *Nanoism*, and *Fiction Writers Review*, where he lends a hand directing development.

What time he has left, he invests in psychoanalyzing a 13 lb. rescue pup he found trolling the streets of Los Angeles.

Edited by Matt Bell.